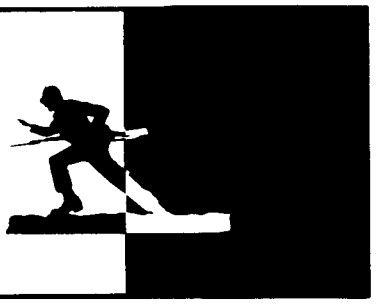
TRAINING NOTES



"On the Staff"

Success Through Teamwork

LIEUTENANT COLONEL RICHARD D. HOOKER, JR

Not long ago I served as a staff officer in an infantry battalion. Although I wasn't the best staff officer in the Army, I learned many lessons that may be useful to you—the infantry officer facing your first staff assignment. You have a big job ahead of you, one that is important to the Army, your battalion, and the troops you'll support. Although you may have little choice of your new assignment, how well you perform is all up to you. Make sure you prep your battlefield to make the most of what lies ahead.

The First Week

You'll probably start your tour of duty by meeting with the battalion commander. Hopefully, you've reviewed the unit's mission and your new boss's command philosophy before you meet. This is a good time to listen and take notes, paying careful attention to his priorities and his assessment of where your new section is strong and where it needs work. Note the colonel's views on officership in general, and staff officership in particular. They're based on many years of experience in different jobs. Avoid discussing your future aspirations; there will be time for that later. Your performance in your new job will determine your future in the battalion, anyway. Focus on being a great staff officer first, and the rest will take care of itself.

Your next office call will be with the battalion executive officer. The XO is as critical to your success as anyone else in the battalion—the commander included. As the "chief of staff," he will personally supervise you, and his views of your performance are important. His specific mandate is to monitor your section closely and ensure that its efforts are integrated with those of the rest of the staff. All good XOs want a smooth, well-functioning staff operation that supports the commander and the troops. That's a big job. Help him do it by doing *your* job well, so he doesn't have to.

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In most infantry battalions, the S-3 is usually a major. If your S-3 is a captain, do not assume he is your peer. He isn't. He is there because he was a superb commander who has earned the colonel's trust and confidence as a member of the inner circle. Treat him as the senior leader he is. If he is a major, be aware that even in the best battalions there is a dynamic tension between the field grades. Because abilities, experiences, and personalities differ, the duties and responsibilities of the XO and the S-3 may overlap or diverge from what doctrine suggests. The key point to remember is never to attempt to play one off the other. It's unprofessional, it hurts the battalion, and it will be noticed. If you receive conflicting guidance, advise your rater, and execute his guidance. Make sure you inform and consult with your supervisor before seeking an audience with the battalion commander on any issue. You owe him that professional courtesy, and he will know when an issue needs to be elevated and when it doesn't.

During your first week the command sergeant major will likely stop by with a cup of coffee to say hello (and to size you up). If not, you should seek him out. If he is like most, he will make it a point to mentor young staff officers, and you should listen carefully to his counsel. He will wear several hats: He is the commander's trusted agent and principal adviser. He is the head of an elite fraternity, the senior NCOs in the battalion, upon whom the unit's success

depends. And he is a special staff officer in his own right, often with specific responsibilities assigned by the commander. Make him an ally. You'll be glad you did.

The next order of business is to meet your NCO in charge. Unlike you, he will probably be an MOS-trained specialist who has built a career in his particular staff specialty. Now is the right time to make sure that you both share the same number one priority—taking care of soldiers. Directly or indirectly, all staff sections exist to support the troops. A good way to sound out your new right-hand man is to ask about the unit's most recent command inspection. If he can quote the results in his area by heart, he's probably on top of things. (If not, beware: he may not be as knowledgeable and informed as you would like.) State up front that you intend to work through him, not around him; that you will welcome his input on all aspects of your soldiers' individual performance, on and off duty. As a team, you can contribute a great deal to the success of the battalion. You both bear a heavy responsibility. Make sure you live up to it.

Once you've met these key personnel, you'll want to meet your troops. Most staff sections are a mixed bag, with some standout performers and others who are there because, for one reason or another, they were not measuring up in the line units. Do not be the staff officer who always complains that you're not getting the very best. The very best belong in the line, where they can fight. Keep an open mind. In time, you will find that some of your new troops have found a special niche and have skills that enable them to make major contributions in their area. Others will be outstanding performers no matter where they are assigned. A few may be on their last stop before leaving the Army. But all deserve the same standard of leading and caring. Later, as a commander, you'll be coping with many more people and many more challenges. Use this opportunity to hone your troop leading skills in preparation for bigger things.

There are a few basic rules for all soldiers serving on the staff that you should remember and enforce. First, never forget that you are combat soldiers, too. Your standards of physical fitness, weapon proficiency, combat discipline, and fieldcraft must be the same as your peers in the rifle companies. Your common task skills must be up to standard. You must dig your own positions, conduct your own patrols, and man your own observation posts. Never fall into the trap of thinking there is one standard for the "line doggies" and another for you. They are there to carry the fight to the enemy—not to take care of you—and your job is to deal with any threats in your area and continue to do the job they are counting on you to do.

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In the same vein, be aware that the soldiers you support are extremely sensitive to perceived differences in living and working conditions. Your working hours should be the same as theirs. Your living conditions in the field should match theirs. Your troops should receive the same treatment when it comes to awards, promotions, and schools as those in the line units—no more, no less. You will find it that much harder to succeed if you allow a "we/they" perception to tale root.

Meeting Your Peers

Let's be frank: As a staff officer, you'll sometimes feel a little bit like a second-class citizen. Although a valued member of the team, you are not part of that special circle who wear green tabs. The company commanders belong to a select group whose chief is the battalion commander. As an aspiring commander yourself, always be aware that the company commanders are different from you. They wield the power of decision, while you, as staff officer, can only advise and recommend. Your duties and your performance are important, and often critical, to the success or failure of the battalion. But you cannot succeed without respecting their prerogatives and the heavy responsibilities they carry.

In your first days as a staff officer, it's a good idea to meet privately with each commander on his turf. Introduce yourself, fill him in on your background and assure him that you are there to help him and his subordinates do their jobs. Ask for his views about your new staff section—how it performs, its strengths and weaknesses, how it can improve. Assure him that you will never send bad news about his unit up the chain of command without a heads up, and tactfully let him know that you expect the same courtesy. Managing your relationships with the commanders must be a high priority, and helping them do their jobs must be your personal concern.

The headquarters company commander deserves special mention. His is a tough job. He must be a commander and a staff officer at the same time. His unit is much larger and more complex than the line units. His troops are not completely his own since their loyalties are split between their company and their respective staff sections. His training and administrative requirements will sometimes conflict with yours. Try hard to look at matters from his point of view, and don't allow friction to develop. Compromise is almost always possible if you both work at it. The more you help each other, the better your battalion will be.

Forging strong relationships with the company commanders is important, but keep in mind that meeting the battalion commander's needs comes first. You get paid to make sure all of your units meet established standards in your area, and to keep the commander informed. In this regard, you are clothed with his authority and, within your area, empowered to carry out necessary actions in his name. Use that power judiciously and with common sense. If a unit is slipping, you should be among the first to know. Inform the company commander, help him with the resources to fix the problem, and follow up. Don't wait until the next command and staff

meeting to surface the issue where it would embarrass the commander. You are all on the same team, working together to care for the troops and stay combat ready. Just remember—one day you'll be a commander too.

I found the first few weeks in a new staff job confusing, and you may too. As infantry officers, we like to think we are trained and destined to lead troops in combat, not to be personnel or logistics experts. Nevertheless, you'll be expected to learn your new job thoroughly and *quickly*. No excuse will be acceptable if you don't rapidly gain mastery of your new job. Break out the applicable regulations, field manuals, and technical manuals. Visit your counterparts in sister battalions. Get to know your counterparts at brigade and division. Study unit SOPs and command inspection reports. Drop in on the units frequently and get to know the XOs and commodity chiefs. In short, throw yourself into your new job with all the enthusiasm you can muster, and get a handle on things in the first few weeks. It's not rocket science—and there's no time to lose!

Principles of Good Staff Work

What makes a good staff officer? To start with, it's not a question of personality. The ideal staff officer is not quiet, scholarly, and meticulous any more than the ideal commander is outgoing, dynamic, and action-oriented. Good staff officers, like good commanders, come in many flavors—but all share some things in common.

The first rule is *know your job*. With the possible exception of your NCOIC, no one in the battalion should know your area better than you do. The commanders are generalists by necessity, but you must be the expert in your field. Establish a reputation as the "go-to" guy when things must happen. You are the first stop when people need help in unfamiliar territory. They are depending on you. Make sure they can.

Next you must *train your people*. The daily demands of running your section and supporting the troops will make this harder than you think. Carve out time to train, and prepare your training thoroughly, just as you did as a platoon leader. If your troops are competent at their current grade, help them prepare for duties at the next—a deep bench is a great asset. Then cross-train them to build versatility and flexibility into your section. A word of caution, though: Even when training, remain available for soldiers who need assistance and need it now. Remember the prime directive: Take care of the soldiers.

Good staff officers are *proactive*. A wise old colonel once told me, "Don't ask for guidance unless you really want some!" Look ahead, anticipate events and requirements, and take positive control of your area while keeping the chain of command informed. Be alert for opportunities to help the battalion perform better. Be the kind of staff officer who needs an occasional spot-check, not constant over-supervision. Lean forward in the foxhole!

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A key rule of the road is to *stay in your lane*. Your fellow staff officers and the company commanders will appreciate your active support, but not your active involvement in their business. Sometimes there are gray areas, but not often. Learning your job and running a first-rate staff section will keep you busy. Avoid the temptation to stray off course. If you do, the results can be unpleasant, and your effectiveness—and credibility—may suffer. Understand the big picture, but watch *your* lane.

The essence of good staff work can be summed up in two words: *Follow up*. We've all seen staff officers who produce blizzards of memos, full of good ideas, but are too lazy to follow through. Patience and persistence are key qualities you must have to succeed. Your commander wants systems in place that enable the battalion to execute routine functions to a high standard. The staff provides the forcing function to build strong systems and make excellence routine. As the eyes and ears of the commander, you must get down to the companies frequently to coach and monitor your counterparts. Discipline yourself to follow up. It's the only way to be the best you can be.

To be a first-rate staff officer *don't miss suspenses*. This is so fundamental it should be obvious, yet many units are plagued by chronically late suspenses. Right out of the gate, establish and enforce the principles of meeting suspenses on time. Do not allow your subordinates, or the company XOs, to be cavalier about your requirements for information or action. Keep the suspense file and take action early, before suspenses start to slip. There will be times when a late suspense can't be helped, but these should be rare. Make it a point of honor to get your stuff in on time. Because timeliness matters in combat, it matters all the time.

All good staff officers *communicate effectively*. Too many officers are poor writers and briefers. Fortunately, effort and practice can produce rapid improvement. Strive to write clearly and directly in the active voice, using short, concise sentences. Avoid grammatical errors and misspelled words—they show poor preparation and inattention to detail. Rehearse your briefings and keep them crisp and to the point. The commander's time is valuable, so don't waste it. Honing your written and oral communication skills is a key part of your professional development. Without them, you won't go far.

In any job in an infantry battalion, the best performers *work hard, work fast*, and *work well*. The staff is no exception. As a field grade officer, I saw many young staff officers burning the midnight oil, but I was more impressed with the ones who worked intensely and well. There's a difference. A well-organized, decisive staff officer knows his business and gets it done. He understands the second- and third-order effects of his actions and the commander's intent. In the field, you've got to produce a quality product, and you've got to do it fast. Time waits for no one in combat.

Next you must *learn to delegate*. That same wise old colonel also taught

me: "Never do anything you can get someone else to do." He wasn't talking about being lazy. He meant that you can't do everything yourself—the tasks you *can't* delegate will keep you busy enough. Once you've trained your section, assign them tasks, then stand back and let them spread their wings. Spot-check and monitor, with due allowance for the mistakes of the young and eager. Let your NCOIC manage daily operations and run the section while you concentrate on quality control, long-range planning, and personal interaction with the green-tabbers. Don't be a micro-manager; power down.

Lastly, learn to *do the important things first*. On a typical day, dozens of issues will compete for your time and attention. Sorting out the important from the trivial is a big part of your job. Prioritizing your missions, assigning responsibilities, and providing resources to get the important jobs done first is *your* job. No one else can do it for you. If you're not sure which missions come first, seek guidance from your boss. Soon you'll be able to sort out the "must do now" issues from the "delegate" or "this can wait" piles.

In sharing my reminiscences of the staff, I haven't discussed the core values of officership because they apply all the time, everywhere: Let your word be your bond. Be a team player. Support the chain of command. Set the example. Know your job. Put the troops first. Focus on warfighting. When Robert E. Lee said that "duty is the sublimest word in the English language," he meant that doing your duty encompasses all the values that define our profession of arms. Those are words to live by.

These, then, are the lessons I remember as a staff officer. I hope they will serve you as well as they have me. There is a theory that you can be a good commander or a good staff officer, but not both. Don't buy it. Great leadership and great staff skills complement and reinforce each other to make great infantry officers. At the end of the day, you'll treasure this time as great training for command and a great opportunity to learn and grow.

Follow me!

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